

**Situated Responses and Professional Development for Changing Student
Demographics in the New Latino South**

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Abstract

This paper describes the outcomes and key elements of collaborative professional development on K-12 educators working to improve education of Latino and English learning students in a state with rapidly changing demographics. Across four years (2003-04 through 2006-07), 37 teams from 16 urban, suburban, and rural school districts in the state of Georgia took part in university-sponsored, year-long professional development resulting in creation and implementation of localized “action plans” in their school settings. Action plans were coded thematically to find common focal areas for implementation, and corresponding evaluation data (self-assessment of the professional development’s impact, $n=174$; 4 items exemplifying implementation themes from a pre- and post-participation questionnaire, $n=109$) were investigated for impact. Open-ended responses on year-end questionnaires identified aspects of the professional development which participants found especially beneficial. Common areas selected across teams for action plan implementation were (1) reducing language barriers; (2) improving family and parent engagement; (3) piloting instructional modifications; and (4) providing additional professional development. Paired samples t-tests for related pre- to post-questionnaire items demonstrated significant ($p<.001$) improvement in participants’ assessment of these areas for themselves/their schools. 59.8% of respondents likewise indicated a “large impact” of the professional development on their work, attitude, or preparedness. Participants identified key characteristics of the professional development’s success: the value of access to expert presenters; the value of interaction with peer groups during the professional development; and the value of participating in a formalized university-sponsored program. These participant-identified factors, in addition to those suggested by review of past research, may be helpful in planning successful future university-sponsored professional development with K-12 educators. (Contains 6 tables)

Context and Theoretical Framework

Substantial research (e.g., Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Garcia, 2001; González, Huerta-Macías, & Tinajero, 2001; Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002; Portes, 2005; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Slavin & Calderón, 2001; Valverde, 2006) has focused on educational challenges for Latino and English-language-learner (ELL) students. The situation is especially acute in states throughout the Southeast U.S., a receiving zone for the so-called “new Latino diaspora” (Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002), whose educational systems must adjust to rapid increases of Latino, immigrant, and English-learning populations. Such changes to the student population mean that schools, administrators, teachers and staff must respond—often quickly and with limited resources—to the needs of a new and changing work environment in order to effectively educate and support these students and their families (Garcia, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009; Howard, 2007; Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000). However, even in fields where much is known about appropriate practice, this knowledge does not always result in improved practice and outcomes. This “implementation gap” (Garcia, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009) is a national issue, representing “a mismatch between what works and what is commonly done in classrooms across the United States” (p. 12). Likewise, providers of professional development may be unsure what areas to focus resources and attention on, and how to best organize efforts.

At the same time, a growing body of research in content fields such as science and mathematics suggests features of effective professional development for working with school personnel. For instance, Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman (2002) reported from their longitudinal studies of math and science teachers that professional development organized around a content focus, promoting coherence with their experiences and goals, and involving active learning, was most successful. They also identified “reform type” activities, those with longer duration, and those emphasizing collective participation of people from the same school, as additional features of effective professional learning. In their review, Penuel, Fishman,

Yamaguchi, & Gallagher (2007) likewise identified as key features of (science teachers') professional development, those efforts that are reform-oriented, longer-term, collaborative, content-focused, coherent with teachers' goals, and that take into account the local context of the school.

Objectives

What can be learned from how schools and universities collaborate to respond to the "demographic imperative" (Garcia, Jensen & Scribner, 2009) of teaching rapidly-increasing Latino and ELL populations, which can be applied to future professional development in such settings? When schools and individual educators are offered scaffolded support to focus on their perceived areas of greatest importance, what thematic commonalities emerge? As Borko (2004) has noted, there is an "urgent need" for additional descriptive and evaluative research on professional development in "areas that have received little attention to date" (p. 12). The two objectives of this paper, carried out via a multi-focal analysis of the implementation and outcomes of the professional development, are thus: (1) to distill a set of common action outcomes shared across different settings by school personnel responding to these rapidly changing school demographics; and (2) to evaluate the perceived outcomes and impacts of these professional development activities for improving Latino/ELL education.

Context, Methods and Data

The present study follows Borko's (2004; Putnam & Borko, 2000) "situative" research perspective that includes both individuals and groups as units of analysis, including the interrelated elements of the professional development program, teacher participants, facilitators, and context of the professional development (p. 4). It thus includes both "phase 1"/"existence proof" of effective professional learning, and "phase 2" or investigation of enactment across time

at different sites—in this case, over three dozen geographically and demographically diverse school-based teams in Georgia across four consecutive years of cooperative customized professional development efforts between schools and a grant-funded university center (CLASE, the Center for Latino Achievement & Success in Education). Data were gathered during four academic years (2003-04 through 2006-07) from participants involved in year-long professional development activities as a part of a school or district team working with a university research and development center focused on Latino and ELL education.

The voluntary professional development included a four-day summer institute providing initial training (from university and national facilitators) on Latino and ELL educational issues and information on successful programs and resources from other schools and states; creation, with support, of a team-specific (school- or district-based) “action plan” of goals and activities to implement during the coming school year; university support in implementing this action plan; and fall and spring one-day follow-up workshops with participants, including extended learning as well as reports from teams. Across four years, a total of 37 teams from 16 urban, suburban, and rural school districts in the state of Georgia took part in the professional development. Teams thus represented a variety of settings, both high-density ELL/Latino and relatively low-density schools. Additionally, teams represented elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as district-wide or multi-school groups; each team (6-12 people) included both teachers and administrators, and applied to take part in professional development for a year. While each set of teams attended a multi-day professional development retreat as well as one-day fall and spring workshops, thus providing a common knowledge base within a given year, each team’s individualized action plan responded to the needs and resources of their own, quite diverse settings.

Focal Areas for Action Plan Implementation

To address the first research question of what commonalities of focus were identified as implementation outcomes across diverse teams, data sources included the teams' action plans, observations of implementation, and presentations by teams at follow-up workshops during the year. Feedback and action plans were analyzed thematically with open coding to determine commonalities across sites.

Effectiveness of the Professional Development

Self-report data. At the end of the year of participation (in March-April), educators were asked to evaluate ("large influence, medium influence, small influence, no influence") the impact of their participation with CLASE on their teaching in general, on their attitude towards working with English learners/Latinos, and their preparedness to do so. This same evaluation included open-ended questions, for example: "How do you think your school's participation in CLASE programs has impacted, or will impact, Latino/Hispanic educational success at your school?"

Participants were also asked to complete a 67-item Likert-type questionnaire (pre- and post-participation) detailing knowledge and attitudes about Latino students and families and participants' level of preparedness in working with them. Items were statements with four responses (4=Agree Completely; 3= Agree Mostly; 2= Agree Slightly; 1=Disagree). Due to changes in team composition and not all participants completing all assessments, only 109 of about 400 total participants completed both pre- and post-participation questionnaires. Table 1 summarizes these participants' self-reported characteristics; participants were mostly female, white, elementary teachers, with masters degrees but no ESOL endorsement. Additionally, participants reflected a substantial degree of expertise; their mean age was 42.5 years (SD=10.5) and they reported a mean of 10.2 years (SD, 8.0) of teaching experience in Georgia and 3.7 years (SD, 6.3) elsewhere.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants Completing Pre- and Post-Questionnaires

Job Role	Job Setting	Ethnicity	Gender	Educational Level	ESOL Endorsement
Teacher (62.4%)	Elementary School (38.5%)	White (71.6%)	Female (86.2%)	Bachelors (28.4%)	Have Endorsement (40.4%)
Staff (15.6%)	High School (23.9%)	Hispanic/Latino (13.8%)	Male (12.8%)	Masters (48.6%)	Do Not Have (54.1%)
Administrator (11.9%)	Middle School (16.5%)	African American (10.1%)	Not Reported (.9%)	Specialist (17.4%)	In Process (4.6%)
Other/missing (10.1%)	District-wide / Multi- school (21.1%)	Other (4.5%)		Doctorate (2.8%)	Not Reported (.9%)
				Not Reported (2.8%)	

Four questions of interest for the current evaluation were selected *a posteriori* based on the “action plan” implementation themes across teams, to assess whether participants perceived any difference in how the implementation of the professional development action plan impacted their students, school or selves. The questions that best related to each of the four focal areas found in the action plans were evaluated with repeated samples t-tests to determine if there were accompanying changes pre- to post-participation.

Participant-identified success factors. Finally, participants' open-ended feedback provided at the end of the year of participation was analyzed thematically to identify aspects of the professional development initiative that participants specified as of particular value or benefit.

Results and Conclusions

Focal Areas for Action Plan Implementation

Analysis of the team action plans across multiple sites and settings demonstrated that team efforts to implement the knowledge and support from the professional development were oriented principally towards four fields. These were identified as (1) reducing language barriers; (2) improving family and parent engagement; (3) piloting instructional modifications; and (4) providing additional professional development.

Activities aimed at **reducing language barriers** between the generally monolingual school setting and ELL students and their parents were a vital first step in most action plans. Specific ways that teams engaged in accomplishing this in their individualized settings included installing bilingual signage; prioritizing bilingual personnel as new hires; promoting use of multiple languages in the school and classroom; and utilizing technology ranging from AT&T's "language line" to simultaneous interpreting.

Second, most teams had an explicit focus on **improving family and parent engagement**. Teams achieved this through implementing programs such as parent mornings or nights, Latino PTA subgroups, family resource centers at schools, collaboration with community agencies, and targeted outreach, for instance having the school serve as a venue for community meetings on drivers' licenses or immigration issues.

Another common focus of teams' action plans entailed **instructional modifications** in the school and classroom. These included, for instance, providing sheltered content instruction at

the secondary level, focusing on use of cognates in class instruction, and providing access to bilingual resources and books. At the school level, modifications allowing extended learning time (such as periods before and after school or during lunch) and different strategies for grouping and serving ELLs were implemented.

Continued training and **professional development** were also a key focus for almost every team. Topically, these training initiatives included four categories: improving the knowledge base of mainstream teachers (e.g., English to Speakers of Other Languages endorsement courses; short courses of best practices strategies for English learners; in-service guest speakers; etc.); improving the knowledge base of non-instructional school staff (e.g., parent liaison training; front-office personnel training); getting non-team members from the school or district to buy in to the importance of the action plans and their implementation; and modifying attitudes of school personnel towards Latino students and families (e.g., cultural awareness training; international exposure).

Effectiveness of the Professional Development

Self-report data. From the spring survey of participants at the final workshop of the program year, respondents ($n=174$ across four years) rated their perceptions of how their participation in the professional development impacted their teaching/work in general; their attitudes towards working with Latinos/English learners; and their preparedness for doing so. Table 2 summarizes these outcomes, showing that participants generally perceived a large impact on these areas from their participation in the professional development initiative.

Table 2

Participant Year-End Perceptions of Impacts of Professional Development

Impact Area	Measure	Large	Medium	Small	No
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		Impact	Impact	Impact	Impact
Impact on Work/ Teaching in General	Count (n=170)	109	54	7	0
	Percent of Total	62.6%	31.0%	4.0%	0.0%
Impact on Attitudes	Count (n=170)	127	36	6	1
	Percent of Total	73.0%	20.7%	3.4%	0.6%
Impact on Preparedness	Count (n=170)	104	62	3	1
	Percent of Total	59.8%	35.6%	1.7%	0.6%

From the pre- and post-participation questionnaire, four questions were selected to represent the four themes of the teams' "action plan" implementation. For each question, Table 3 shows the questionnaire items, the pre- and post-participation means and standard deviations, and the results from paired-sample t-tests. In each case, participants reported significant increases in these areas. (Lower scores represented greater disagreement with the statements.)

Table 3

Participant Pre- to Post-Assessment of Impact on Implementation Areas

Impact Area	Questionnaire Item	N	Mean (SD), Pre	Mean (SD),	t (df)	Sign. (2- tailed)
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Post							
Reducing Language Barriers	2. “I am able to communicate effectively with Latino parents.”	105	2.41 (1.05)	2.95 (.94)	7.32	.000	
Parent Engagement	33. “The parents of my Latino students attend school functions when invited.”	101	2.65 (.82)	3.00 (.76)	4.88	.000	
Instructional Modifications	20. “I know how to modify my instruction so students who are learning English can master the content.”	82	2.89 (.90)	3.44 (.80)	7.04	.000	
Professional Development	58. “I believe our school has sufficient access to informational resources (like training, knowledge, research results, or contact people) to help Latino students succeed.”	102	2.40 (.85)	3.22 (.83)	8.54	.000	

Thus, these data support the effectiveness of the professional development and its affiliated implementation of team-based action plans throughout the year on increasing participants’ sense of efficacy for themselves as educators, their schools’ ability to engage and

communicate with Latino/ELL parents, and their attitudes towards diverse students. Indeed, this professional development initiative conceptually meets the recommendations of effectiveness characterized by Desimone et al. (2002) and Penuel et al. (2007). It is *reform-oriented*, focusing on ways to change school and classroom culture to be responsive to the new population of learners; it is *longer-term*, including year-long work with university personnel; it is *collaborative*, with participants organized into teams of 6 to 12 from a single school or district; it incorporates *active learning*, with participants moving from theory to practice by implementing an action plan at their school; it is *coherent with teachers' goals*, with the action plans developed by the participants themselves; and the professional development takes into account the *local context* of the school, with decisions about what will be implemented, when, and how made by the participants rather than the university facilitators.

Participant-identified success factors. In addition to these characteristics of successful professional development identified in prior research, participants themselves noted certain aspects of the program which seemed especially impactful. Specifically, three additional themes of what was valued in this professional development emerged from analysis of program feedback: the value of access to expert presenters; the value of interaction with peer groups during the professional development; and the value of participating in a formalized university-sponsored program. These participant-identified factors may be helpful in understanding important elements for future university-sponsored professional development with K-12 educators.

While professional development offered from universities to K-12 personnel can sometimes be regarded with suspicion or indifference, participants in this program reiterated the importance of undertaking these initiatives in the context of the formalized, **university-sponsored relationship**. Participants found that the regular meetings with university liaisons sparked activity in carrying out their plans, and—perhaps more importantly—that taking part in

the program provided cachet and leverage for implementing goals in the face of unenthusiastic or sluggish school or district bureaucracy. Likely, as the teams themselves identified the areas they were to focus their efforts on, they felt the professional development was responsive to their identified needs; and participants who had previously felt like a “lone voice” advocating for a Latino/ELL focus were able to use the prestige of affiliation with the university to “finally” be able to implement needed change. Table 4 provides sample participant quotes relating to this outcome.

Table 4

Participant Feedback on University Partnership

Participant Quote	Source
Participation in CLASE initiatives “has empowered us simple teachers to take risks and to encourage our school to take risks.”	Spring 2004
“Accountability was increased locally w/ UGA connection.”	Spring 2004
Taking part provided “courage to stand for what is right... also solidarity awareness.”	Spring 2005
“CLASE is providing great ideas, advice, and research-based work to help validate our team work! [This] makes our ideas more valid to the district!”	Spring 2006
“We [team members] provide knowledge and insight to others on the faculty and parents.”	Spring 2007
“[Taking part in the program] has helped (somewhat) in communicating to other school officials and teachers th[e]	Spring 2007

needs and resources for our Latino students.”

Learning from identified national, state and university experts during the course of the program activities (summer institutes and follow-up workshops) was repeatedly identified as a key aspect of the impact of the professional development. Perhaps due to the recently changing demographics in the state, many schools and districts had not previously had access to sources of information perceived as expert to help address educators’ concerns about how to effectively support the new Latino population. In fact, teams found particular speakers and information so helpful that they replicated these sessions within their schools or districts, bringing both university and national speakers in to work directly with others who were not part of the original team. Table 5 provides sample quotes from participants’ written year-end evaluations.

Table 5

Participant Feedback on Access to Expert Presenters

Participant Quote	Source
“Our school was ‘starving’ for ways to help our failing and/or struggling Latino population. I think we have a great start now with many strategies and ideas along with new school resources.”	Spring 2004
“The professional learning opportunities have been great.”	Spring 2005
“Speakers and support from UGA has [sic] been extremely wonderful.”	Spring 2006
“The staff development education of the entire faculty ‘forced’ them to sit in the place of an ELL and experience what kids	Spring 2006

do.”
“We have had speakers [at our school] on success beyond high school and how to get into college.” Spring 2007

Coupled with this access to recognized experts from the university and beyond, **peer interaction** and learning from other K-12 educators, teams and schools was identified as a key component of the professional development. In some cases, this entailed formalized sessions at the professional development workshops sharing what worked, or did not work, in local contexts, for instance from participants from prior years’ teams. In other cases, a sense of competitiveness with other schools and districts encouraged completion of the planned goals. A multiplier effect of getting additional teachers and school personnel “on board” with training and program initiatives was also indicated as important, both throughout the year and via the opportunity for schools or districts to field teams for more than one year. Table 6 provides sample participant comments relating to this theme.

Table 6

Participant Feedback on Peer Interaction and Support

Participant Quote	Source
The program “has allowed other schools in my county to form a team so the process will continue.”	Spring 2004
“We are more aware of how we compare with other systems in the region and in the country. We have a better idea of what we need to do.”	Spring 2004
“I think being able to network with other teams to share ideas	Spring 2004

really helped perfect some of the things we wanted to improve.”	
“I think that what we have been able to share with the district has been a good first step—needs to continue to be ongoing.”	Spring 2005
“District-level participation [is happening] so that the push [for improvement] is made at district office.”	Spring 2006
“I think we are making strides district-wide.”	Spring 2006

Significance of Study

Professional development for school personnel in working with Latino and ELL students is of crucial importance (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Fry, 2008; Romo & Falbo, 1996), as schools bear the primary responsibility for ensuring the opportunity for educational success for their students. Both the knowledge of how to work effectively with Latino and ELL students and families, as well as the attitudes of school personnel towards these groups, are critical topics for professional development (Knight & Wiseman, 2005). Bohon, Macpherson, and Atilas (2005) have identified “little school support for the needs of Latino students” in Georgia (p. 43) and suggested “the Georgia school system is ill prepared to accommodate the language and cultural needs of Latinos” (p. 56); likewise, teacher training was identified by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute’s report (Wainer, 2004) as one of the “four major immigrant education issues in new immigrant communities that have been problematic for educators and immigrant families” in Georgia and other newly Latino states (p. 1).

Thus, an increased understanding of effective professional development for meeting these needs is of substantial educational importance, as is an awareness of these recurrent self-identified focal emphases. While the specific ways that the initiatives described in this study were carried out varied based on the local context, resource availability, and participants’ needs,

the findings nonetheless suggest productive topic areas as well as structural elements to include in future professional development initiatives for school personnel in other areas of the country facing changing student demographics.

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